

Capturing the Beast: The Place of Animal Pictorial Imagery in Discursive Strategy Practices

Identity, Metaphors and Discursive Strategy Practices

An important stream of strategy-as-practice (SP) research has focused on the influences of language in and around strategy (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011) to expand research beyond the traditional question of ‘Why do some firms outperform others?’ towards a different but no less fundamental question of ‘How are strategies and strategists in organizations discursively constituted and performed?’ Discursive studies have the potential to transcend strategy field boundaries because they can cross theoretical domains and institutional, organizational and episodic realms (Balogun et al, 2014). However, SP research needs to develop more original theory and cognitive, virtual and visual methods (Rouleau, 2013) beyond verbal texts (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). This study’s contribution is to use pictorial imagery to help explain discursive strategy practices and expand the boundaries of what is considered strategy.

With some exceptions (Floris et al, 2013; Heracleous & Jacobs, 2008; Liu & Maitlis, 2014; Molloy & Whittington, 2005), few studies have tried to examine visual discursive strategy practices based on pictures, photographs, videos and other multimodal devices – a surprising fact given the social ubiquity of digital, moving and printed images (Stiles, 2013). I use novel visual analyses to explore *organizational identity*: a root construct concerning ‘What an organization is?’ or ‘What are we?’ (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Identity is central to determining the strategic values, vision or mission(s) of an organization *before* more mainstream debates over performance can take place (Levin, 2000). Language plays a key role here, with multiple narratives recursively constituting an organization and its actors in an ongoing ‘metaconversation’ in the ‘plurivocal’, or multiple-voice, organization (Robichaud et al, 2004). Rhetoric (persuasive language) helps legitimate strategic change in a discursive struggle between opposing interests (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), defining organizational identity (Fenton & Langley, 2011), establishing the legitimacy of strategists and the shape and meaning of strategy (Paroutis & Heracleous, 2013) to avoid organizational disidentification and ideological fragmentation (Stiles, 2011).

Organizational theory regards *metaphor* as an important device in constituting organizational identity. This trope, or figure of speech, encourages imaginative conceptual contortions rather than direct correspondence between source and target domains (Oswick, Keenoy, & Grant, 2002; Tsoukas, 1991), contributing insight by challenging customary thinking (Morgan, 2006). *Metaphors-in-use* are conventionalised, or established metaphors in general use, resulting in shared meanings within a community (Cornelissen & Kafouros, 2008). These may contribute to a commonly-held organizational identity, which in turn may promote particular ways of strategising. For example, an organization may be seen as a machine, encouraging quantitative measures of productivity rather than long-term sustainable growth and innovation (Farjoun, 2002). Metaphors play important roles in framing and legitimising strategic change because they resonate with broader cultural understanding. These make change appear ‘natural’ and even ‘taken-for-granted’ when defining organizational mission and purpose, or legitimising large shifts in priorities and goals (Cornelissen et al, 2011).

Pictorial Animal Metaphors-in-use

Multimodal metaphors have been used by some SP researchers. Toys in strategy workshops have allowed both target (an organization) and source (toy) to be rendered through an embodied form. A verbal metaphor has more limited creative potential because it is monomodal i.e. it communicates only through words (Bürge et al, 2005; Heracleous and Jacobs, 2008). A few multi-modal studies in organizational theory have examined pictorial images as part of mainly verbal studies of cartoons (Hardy & Phillips, 1999), photographs (Strati, 2000), advertising (Larsen, Luna, & Peracchio, 2004), recruitment brochures (Hancock, 2005), websites (Lamertz et al, 2005) and painting (Hatch & Yanow, 2008). However, socially reflexive texts using pictorial forms are rare in strategy.

This study centres on animal metaphors-in-use. Human beings have always had a deep-set fascination with other creatures. Animals are not simply important functional elements fulfilling transport, work and nutritional needs. Animal images are also the oldest recorded pictorial metaphors-in-use. Cave paintings of animals precede written language by thousands of years, signifying primeval and deeply held beliefs in the magical or religious properties of creatures (Gombrich 1967). In China, the Ganzhi system of animal symbols is fundamental to philosophy, identity and time measurement (Hearn-Tatt 1997). In western literature, Aesop's fables (1993), Andersen's fairy tales (1974) and Carroll's Alice in Wonderland (1990) are among many narratives imbuing animals with human characteristics, reinforcing our special empathy with them. Such anthropomorphism is an innate human tendency, helping to define our relationship with the natural environment, allowing imaginative escapism, and providing a moral and ethical framework to guide behaviour (Pearsall & Trumble 1996: 56). For instance, Aesop (1993) relates the tale of a lion, fox and ass, who agree to forage food from a nearby forest and negotiate how the spoils should be divided. The fair but feeble-minded ass splits the food into three equal shares, giving the other two first choice. Angry at this presumption, the tyrannical lion devours the ass. Challenged to make a more acceptable division, the perspicacious fox creates two unequal piles: one containing virtually everything for the lion. The lion complements the fox on his calculations, enquiring who had taught him the art of perfect division. The fox replies that he had learned it extremely

recently, by witnessing the ass' fate! Such fables are partly based on a quasi-zoological understanding of animals, but function mainly on a metaphorical level.

Research Design

Strategy research needs to integrate narrative and sensemaking /cognitive approaches in order to advance theory and methods (Sonenshein, 2010). Pictorial metaphors-in-use provide one way to do this by combining narrative-laden animal imagery with people's cognitions of their organizations' identities. In a sense, animal metaphors can work as boundary objects (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2009), connecting understanding about phenomena across and within organizations because such metaphors are deeply embedded in universal human myth.

This study uses a narratological perspective (Brown & Thompson, 2013; Fenton & Langley, 2011) to focus on 'sayings' (talk and text), rather than 'doings' (deciding and politicking). It avoids the 'micro-isolationism' of studying only local praxis by adopting a 'tall' ontology to link micro-level praxis with macro or meso phenomena (Seidl and Whittington, 2014). To do this, I use two novel research techniques. A pictorially-based questionnaire, the *animal portfolio*, solicits stakeholders' perceptions of their organization's identity to generate a quantitative profile. Although such data is unusual in SP, the profile can be compared with other organizations, using nonparametric analysis to contextualise micro-level data within a broader view. A second instrument uses the same animal images in a card-sort exercise, *animal metaphor cards*, to help 'drill-down' into each organization using a 'thick' qualitative approach more familiar to SP. This is combined with ethnographic methods such as observation of strategy practices and document analysis.

In total, 1415 people were involved in developing and applying the animal portfolio. Ten representative stakeholders at one case institutions (a UK business school) explained during pilot interviews which animals best described organizations. A narratological analysis (Brown et al, 2008) revealed 16 such animals as the basis for the next stage. During group sessions and in-depth interviews, 272 students and academics were asked to list the five adjectives they most associated with these animals, using digitised images from the author's monochrome ink drawings. Students from 39 countries ensured adjectives were as universal as possible. The resulting animal portfolio was administered in face-to-face sessions with 1132 people in 7 organizations to determine which of the animal images and 80 associated adjectives best described the identity of their particular organization. These included British, Canadian and Malaysian business schools to allow comparison; a science museum, real estate chain, and a small Zambian ecotourism operator to see if the method could be used successfully in different contexts. Four-point likert scales were used to measure the degree to which participants believed each adjective corresponded with their organization (Walker, 1985). Means were calculated and Mann-Whitney tests used to detect significant differences between independent groups since data were non-parametric and samples were moderately sized (Sprent, 1989). The tests compared organizations and gender, age, birthplace and stakeholder groups within each organization. Respondents were also asked to explain through open-ended questions why they favoured one or more animals.

The Animal Metaphor Cards exercise meant exploring perceived organizational identities in more depth using face-to-face interviews and focus groups. These included all major stakeholders: for example, in business schools this included academics, staff, undergraduates, graduate students, and external business advisors; for the companies, customers were also included. First, a widely known Aesop fable about a race between a tortoise and a hare was told, to indicate how animals might be imbued with different characteristics. Then 16 cards, each containing a different animal image, were dealt out at random in front of each respondent/group. The animal portfolio adjectives were not revealed, with respondents simply asked to select one or more animals whose characteristics were seen to come closest to resemble those of their particular organization. Cards were ranked in order of frequency of selection for each organization and rationales for choices audio-taped and analysed using a narrative method (Brown et al, 2008) to reveal salient themes. Observations of strategy meetings and analysis of organizational strategy documents were also undertaken to better understanding strategising in each institution.

Summary Results

Space precludes more detailed discussion, but Figure 1 shows each of the seven organizations had a different profile. In terms of mean scores, the animals most associated with each case were: the donkey (the Canadian school: N=67), chameleon (Malaysian school: n=40), elephant (UK school: n=788; UK call centre: n=81), dolphin (UK real estate agency: n=86; museum: n= 48) and dog (Zambian ecotourism company: n=23). The card sort exercise explored choice rationales in interviews and focus groups. The Canadian school donkey reflected the high-ranking hardworking and sturdy and the medium-ranking stubborn adjectives. One student declared the school was:

“Consistent with very little change; its members are hardworking; and mostly reliable; however they seem to go along with the flow and plod along; many are stubborn - set in their ways and refuse to change”.

The Canadian school’s intellectual and cognitive characteristics were significant, including intelligence, smartness, wisdom, cleverness, sharpness, being observant and having good memory. It was felt to be significantly friendlier and less dirty, slimy and slippery than other cases and not aggressive like the shark, snake or lion. The chameleon was highest ranked animal in the Malaysian school because management was seen to be inconsistent, deceitful and insincere in dealing with junior faculty and staff. Academics’ attendance was regularly checked, leave difficult to obtain and even toilet breaks were monitored. Management were seen as slow in consulting and implementing change and self-protective in covering up errors.

The UK school’s elephantine image showed intelligence and hard work, but the organization was large and heavy. Focus groups believed large student numbers adversely affecting learning, with an inefficient ‘heavy’ administration. Faculty was seen by all groups as intellectual, evidenced by the school’s high research standing; with academics and staff friendly. However, the school was significantly more deceptive, sneaky and cunning than other cases. As one MBA focus group detailed, the school was seen to be manipulative in its externally projected image to prospective students:

“They are out there to make profit... they make no bones about it. They want to make money and that’s why I think they take the numbers that they do. Otherwise they would have a smaller MBA. But yeah, their research results are very good and I think businesses value that”.

At the museum, all dolphin characteristics enjoyed significantly high means, being friendly, playful and hardworking. It was also significantly intelligent, smart, clever and observant to staff and customers. The museum was independent, sturdy, loyal, patient and loveable. The staff was somewhat worried that it was growing too large, isolating management from other staff. There was also concern from exhibition helpers that management were slow to listen to their views about exhibition items, poor pay and conditions.

The real estate agency was seen as significantly hardworking, friendly and loyal by staff and management, with the dolphin signifying friendly customer relations and the organization’s playful social life. The powerful lion and the strong elephant were significant internally, due to success in securing business. Managers believed the organization was viewed poorly externally because of generic UK views of real estate agencies: a view confirmed by customers. A focus group manager explained the fox-like quality of cleverness as:

“We wear a mask. We have to be when we’re quoting our fee. If we can get away with two percent we will”.









The call centre was strong and large, with the lion symbolising power associated with a strong market presence. Hardworking was the highest scoring adjective among staff, followed by being speedy and quick: fox and eagle-like qualities of a hectic call centre environment. Staff also believed it nocturnal because of shift patterns, and friendly. Focus groups indicated some discontentment concerning poor management communication about rule changes and restructuring causing high staff turnover.










The Zambian ecotourist company was significantly hardworking, friendly, loving, and loveable generally. Other dog, dolphin, owl and elephant-related intellectual and cognitive characteristics also scored highly. A sense of being unhurried made the elephant significant. The organization was adaptable, chameleon-like; although shareholders said this showed an unstable management. Being brave like the lion reflected the boldness of plans in a hostile political environment. It was also nocturnal and patient like the owl because of its work. A customer explained that:

“All the people are wise, know what they are talking about. The night time in Africa is always special, so being nocturnal is always fun and beautiful. Being patient and observant is always helpful and is appreciated”.

For every case, significant differences were evident when data were disaggregated into one or more gender, age, stakeholder or birthplace categories, showing multiple identities. For example, among UK school undergraduates adjectives concerning power including mighty, kinglike, powerful, strong, and sturdy were significantly higher than for MBA students, indicating they had more positive views of the school’s market standing. Undergraduates were less critical of student numbers and the prioritisation of research over teaching because they had fewer experiences of other universities. Canadian school undergraduates saw their school as significantly more predatory and bloodthirsty than other stakeholders, with competitive enrolment and assessment. The overall findings were that each organization presents complex, multifaceted identities, with significant differences between groups; and that the boundaries of SP can be extended by using visual methods to explore organizational identity and ‘capture the beast’ inside all organizations.

Figure 1: Visual Animal Metaphors in Seven Case Organizations

Animal	Adjectives	Mean Scores *significant at 0.10 level, ** at 0.05 level, *** at 0.01 level						
		Canadian School	Malay School	UK School	UK Museum	UK Real Estate	UK Call Centre	Zambian Ecotourist
	wise	1.51	*0.28	1.27	*1.53	1.43	1.19	1.04
	nocturnal	0.49	**0.85	***0.61	***0.12	***-0.10	***1.00	***1.17
	patient	0.61	0.68	***0.65	***1.07	***1.22	0.83	***1.22
	mysterious	***0.01	***0.98	0.46	***0.72	***-0.20	0.60	0.70
	observant	0.93	0.75	***0.96	***1.37	***1.31	1.21	1.00
	overall	0.71	0.71	0.79	0.96	0.73	0.97	1.03
	powerful	1.24	*0.98	1.28	***0.95	***1.52	1.46	**0.91
	fierce	***-0.04	**1.05	***0.56	***-0.59	0.64	0.48	***-0.39
	kinglike	0.63	***1.13	0.57	***0.06	0.59	*0.27	0.09
	predatory	**0.28	***1.43	**0.63	***-0.43	0.81	*0.83	*0.17
	brave	0.31	*0.20	0.53	0.47	0.74	**0.83	***1.22
	overall	0.48	0.96	0.71	0.09	0.86	0.78	0.40
	fast	**0.70	***0.43	***1.00	**0.69	1.13	1.13	**0.43
	graceful	***0.10	**0.05	**0.48	0.37	0.48	0.27	0.61
	beautiful	***0.00	*0.05	0.33	***0.75	0.29	0.13	***1.61
	shy	***-0.39	***0.73	***0.24	***-0.49	***-0.35	0.04	-0.04
	weak	***-0.33	1.00	***0.20	***-0.60	***-0.41	0.23	0.22
	overall	0.02	0.45	0.45	0.14	0.23	0.36	0.57
	loyal	0.94	**0.55	**0.95	*1.15	***1.45	0.83	0.96
	loving	**0.16	***0.03	0.47	0.74	0.55	0.31	***1.17
	obedient	0.55	0.85	0.69	***0.27	**0.97	0.75	0.78
	smart	1.60	***0.65	***1.15	1.46	1.28	1.25	1.26
	loveable	***0.19	***0.10	0.58	***1.07	0.59	0.44	***1.26
	overall	0.69	0.44	0.77	0.94	0.97	0.72	1.09
	strong	1.45	***0.48	1.20	1.20	***1.56	*1.35	0.96
	unhurried	**0.45	0.75	0.73	**0.96	**0.44	*0.31	***1.48
	heavy	***0.16	1.28	1.13	***0.01	***0.09	0.94	*0.61
	large	***0.73	1.43	***1.55	0.96	1.12	1.60	***0.30
	good memory	0.82	**0.50	***0.82	0.94	***1.30	1.08	1.09
	overall	0.72	0.89	1.09	0.81	0.90	1.06	0.89
	cuddly	***-0.64	-0.30	***-0.05	-0.09	-0.22	-0.17	***0.78
	lazy	-0.01	***0.83	***0.23	***-0.38	***-0.56	-0.17	0.39
	independent	1.42	***0.45	***1.09	**1.42	***1.42	***1.48	1.13
	sneaky	0.28	1.53	***0.62	***-0.32	***-0.10	0.65	***0.00
	sharp	1.04	0.90	*0.94	0.86	*1.14	**1.19	0.83
	overall	0.42	0.68	0.56	0.30	0.33	0.60	0.63
	friendly	**1.21	***0.95	***1.18	***1.86	***1.74	1.44	**1.52
	intelligent	*1.67	***0.88	***1.41	***1.81	***1.62	1.54	1.52
	playful	0.40	0.60	***0.39	***1.68	***0.91	0.69	0.74
	streamlined	0.57	***-0.15	0.76	*0.91	**0.95	0.52	0.61
	cute	***-0.67	***0.58	0.01	0.09	-0.06	-0.25	***0.74
	overall	0.64	0.57	0.75	1.27	1.03	0.79	1.03
	cunning	0.60	***1.38	***0.86	***0.33	***0.45	**1.21	***0.22
	clever	**1.15	***0.78	1.32	***1.64	**1.50	1.44	1.22
	quick	0.72	**0.60	0.91	0.88	***1.27	**1.23	***0.43
	wicked	***-0.46	***1.03	***0.33	***-0.63	***-0.09	0.35	***-0.39
	distrustful	**0.07	***1.25	***0.31	***-0.64	***-0.26	0.31	**0.26
	overall	0.39	1.01	0.75	0.32	0.57	0.91	0.24

Animal	Adjectives	Mean Scores *significant at 0.10 level, ** at 0.05 level, *** at 0.01 level						
		Canadian School	Malay School	UK School	UK Museum	UK Real Estate	UK Call Centre	Zambian Ecotourist
	foolish	-0.07	*0.88	*-0.01	*-0.56	***-0.36	0.15	-0.30
	hardworking	1.45	**1.15	***1.33	***1.59	***1.80	***1.71	1.65
	stubborn	0.88	1.23	***0.91	***0.15	***0.52	0.75	**0.17
	plodding	***0.04	***0.98	***0.50	***0.00	***-0.05	0.19	***0.96
	sturdy	***1.37	***0.43	***0.94	**1.23	**1.19	1.13	1.26
	overall	0.73	0.93	0.73	0.48	0.62	0.78	0.75
	small	-0.31	-0.15	**0.09	**0.42	*0.40	-0.40	***0.70
	timid	***-0.54	***0.68	***0.00	***-0.60	***-0.57	-0.25	0.17
	nimble	***-0.27	0.45	0.24	*0.47	0.38	0.38	0.13
	dirty	***-0.78	***0.80	***-0.07	***-0.67	***-0.67	-0.27	-0.22
	pestlike	***-0.64	1.08	***-0.04	-0.79	***-0.51	-0.29	**0.65
	overall	-0.51	0.57	0.01	-0.40	-0.35	-0.17	0.03
	deadly	***-0.58	***0.68	***0.28	***-0.73	***-0.08	0.33	**0.39
	ferocious	***-0.18	**0.60	***0.29	***-0.65	0.16	0.23	**0.35
	overpowering	0.42	***1.10	***0.67	***-0.27	***0.09	0.48	***-0.35
	bloodthirsty	**0.09	***0.83	***0.35	***-0.73	0.17	0.23	**0.48
	cruel	***-0.31	0.98	***0.17	***-0.81	***-0.58	-0.17	***0.74
	overall	-0.15	0.84	0.35	-0.64	-0.05	0.22	-0.46
	bird of prey	***-0.04	***1.00	***0.55	***-0.37	0.57	0.65	0.17
	mighty	0.72	0.50	0.80	***0.40	0.91	0.92	***0.04
	swift	0.58	0.43	0.61	0.56	***1.02	***1.06	0.48
	majestic	0.27	***0.03	0.54	0.54	0.51	0.58	0.83
	sharp-eyed	***0.52	0.80	0.92	1.02	1.09	**1.17	1.00
	overall	0.41	0.55	0.68	0.43	0.82	0.88	0.50
	ugly	***-0.75	***0.73	***0.18	***-0.64	***-0.59	-0.04	**0.57
	adaptable	1.13	0.83	***0.94	***1.42	1.19	1.15	*1.35
	colour-changing	0.27	***1.55	0.62	0.48	0.20	**1.06	1.04
	deceptive	***-0.07	1.45	***0.47	0.11	***-0.13	0.71	*0.04
	strange	***-0.01	***1.40	***0.45	0.41	***-0.52	0.38	**0.26
	overall	0.11	1.19	0.53	0.36	0.03	0.65	0.30
	slow	0.13	***1.18	***0.47	***-0.26	***-0.35	*0.02	0.87
	slimy	***-0.45	1.05	***0.22	***-0.77	***-0.50	0.08	-0.17
	self-protective	1.30	***1.53	1.10	***0.56	*0.93	1.13	0.74
	vulnerable	***-0.07	***0.98	0.29	***-0.01	***-0.05	0.35	***0.83
	defensive	**0.60	-0.18	***-0.25	***-0.75	***-0.62	-0.38	-0.17
	overall	0.06	0.91	0.37	-0.25	-0.12	0.24	0.42
	dangerous	***-0.55	***0.98	***0.22	***-0.68	**0.16	0.23	-0.22
	poisonous	***-0.75	1.03	0.07	***-0.74	***-0.43	-0.13	**0.61
	slippery	***-0.40	***1.05	***0.19	***-0.68	***-0.37	0.27	*0.30
	evil	-0.58	***0.68	***-0.14	***-0.90	***-0.71	-0.21	**0.70
	sly	**0.06	***1.20	***0.16	***-0.67	***-0.38	0.33	-0.26
	overall	-0.44	0.99	0.10	-0.73	-0.41	0.10	-0.42
	speedy	***0.37	0.43	0.74	**0.47	**1.07	***1.23	0.83
	tall	0.43	0.45	*0.65	0.52	0.43	*0.85	0.65
	stupid	*-0.39	***0.75	***-0.07	***-0.68	***-0.60	0.04	**0.74
	cowardly	***-0.48	***0.73	***-0.09	***-0.75	***-0.63	-0.06	-0.48
	awkward	***-0.25	***0.95	***0.39	***-0.32	***-0.33	*0.04	-0.04
	overall	-0.06	0.66	0.33	-0.15	-0.01	0.40	0.04

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